

TOP SECRET

The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D. C. 20505

27 May 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Edmund S. Muskie  
Secretary of State

Attached is a brief Intelligence Memorandum dealing with the near-term political prospects in Iran. I believe that you will find it useful as we meet to discuss the shape and character of our future dealings with that country. Even though some hopes may be raised regarding our prospects for resolving outstanding issues and given that the Majlis is convening tomorrow, it is worthwhile to remember, as this paper points out, that there is a definite fragility to the individuals and institutions which have risen to power thus far.

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NSA review(s) completed.

  
STANSFIELD TURNER

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*Note: ER will forward on 5/28/80.*

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Approved For Release 2005/01/10 : CIA-RDP81B00401R000500110038-7  
The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D. C. 20505

27 May 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Harold Brown  
Secretary of Defense

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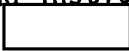
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Approved For Release 2005/01/10 : CIA-RDP81B00401R000500110038-7  
The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D. C. 20505

27 May 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Zbigniew Brzezinski  
Assistant to the President  
for National Security Affairs

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27 May 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: General David C. Jones, USAF  
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

22 May 1980

## MEMORANDUM

## IRAN: NEAR TERM POLITICAL PROSPECTS

*Some 200 days after the beginning of the hostage crisis, there is little sign that a moderate regime is ready to emerge in Tehran prepared to negotiate in good faith and with real power to end the hostages' ordeal. The prospects are good that, for at least the next three months, the US will continue to have to deal with a confusing and sometimes even bewildering political situation in Iran in which the hostages are pawns in an internal power struggle.*

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Background

The current political situation in Iran is dominated by infighting among numerous, competing factions that recognize Khomeini as the ultimate source of leadership and authority in the country. The Ayatollah's charismatic appeal to the mass of lower-class Iranians is the glue holding the revolution and Iran together.

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The absence of a real power center other than Khomeini is in large part deliberate. Khomeini prefers that no one leader or group secure enough power to rival his own status or to impose the kind of dictatorship the Shah developed.

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This memorandum was prepared by [ ] of the Southwest Asia Analytic Center/Iran, Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to Deputy Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center [ ]

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Despite the confusion in Tehran and the occasional outbursts of minority unrest in the provinces, Khomeini's hold on power is relatively secure. No opposition leader is ready to challenge him directly because he remains capable of mobilizing mass support to suppress his enemies. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, there are some signs that enthusiasm for the Islamic revolution is waning. Khomeini's once near universal popular support has diminished somewhat--despite his efforts to rally Iranians behind the occupation of the US Embassy. The minorities--including the influential Azarbayjanis--are openly disaffected, the middle class is disillusioned, and the left is making gains among the unemployed. Discontent with the revolution's failure to improve the lot of the common Iranian and to bring stability and order to the country seems certain to continue to grow but probably will not reach a critical stage in the next three months. [REDACTED]

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#### Power Struggle In Tehran

The 80 year-old Khomeini's fragile health--especially since his hospitalization in January--has become a major factor in Iran's politics. It has intensified the power struggle among the various groups around him. The situation is extremely fluid, and the positions of each of the key actors is subject to rapid shifting as alliances change. [REDACTED]

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The principal clash is between the secular government led by President Bani-Sadr and the clerical faction led by Ayatollah Beheshti, Secretary General of the Islamic Republic Party and Chief of the Supreme Court. Despite winning over 75 per cent of the popular vote in the presidential election, Bani-Sadr has failed to consolidate his grip on power and has suffered a series of humiliating political defeats at Beheshti's hand. The most serious has been the IRP's electoral victory in the legislative elections--the Party will have a narrow majority of supporters in the National Assembly. Many independents will probably back the IRP. [REDACTED]

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The Assembly's deliberations will be complicated by the absence of firm party discipline, however, and the lack of precedent for establishing legislative procedures. There is a good chance that the Assembly's discussions could become interminable debating sessions. [REDACTED]

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In the next three months, the power struggle between Bani-Sadr and Beheshti will probably center around the relationship between the president, the legislature, the Revolutionary Council and the prime minister. Beheshti will try to use the IRP's dominant position in the Assembly to

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reduce Bani-Sadr to a figurehead. Although according to the constitution Bani-Sadr as president nominates his own prime minister, the Assembly has the power to confirm or reject his choice. A lengthy confrontation over this issue seems likely--one that may ultimately be resolved only by Khomeini's intervention. [redacted]

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The struggle between Bani-Sadr and Beheshti will also dominate the Assembly's discussion of the hostage issue. Bani-Sadr continues to recognize that the hostage crisis weakens both his own political position and damages Iran, and he is likely to urge the legislators to seek a facesaving end to the confrontation with the US. Beheshti and other hardline clerics will use the hostage crisis to exploit anti-US sentiments and play to Khomeini's own hardline stance on the issue in order to weaken Bani-Sadr. [redacted]

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Bani-Sadr's prospects are poor. While he may be able to drag out the power struggle for some time, he lacks the organization and charisma to establish a viable power base. He is easily outmaneuvered by Beheshti and Khomeini's radical stance on relations with the US. He may become increasingly irrelevant to decisionmaking in Tehran, and he could choose to resign. [redacted] he has already offered to do so on more than one occasion but has been turned down by Khomeini. If Bani-Sadr does quit, new presidential elections would be necessary. [redacted]

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Beheshti will not find it easy to consolidate his own hold on power, however, and continued confusion in Tehran seems likely. Beheshti's strengths include his skill as a political infighter, broad contacts with numerous factions, and longstanding ideological and personal ties to Khomeini. He is not popular, however, and is opposed by many senior clerics who worry about his ultimate ambitions. Influential figures like Khomeini's son, Ahmad, have little to gain from a clearcut Beheshti victory and will maneuver to maintain and enhance their own political position. [redacted]

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#### Relations with US and USSR

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Relations with the US are not likely to improve in the near term. There is no good reason to believe that the Iranians can be induced by diplomatic or economic sanctions to release the hostages in the next three months. The ultimate decision will remain with Khomeini, whatever the Assembly decides, because only the Ayatollah has the power to compel the militants to give up the hostages. [redacted]

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[redacted]

The Assembly is likely to take a hard line on the hostages--demanding significant concessions from the US. The legislators will be eager to prove their revolutionary credentials, and they will look to Khomeini, Beheshti, senior religious institutions like the Qom Theological Society, and the student militants for guidance. [redacted]

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There is a good chance that the legislature will opt for show trials of the hostages and choose to release the "innocent" while incarcerating the "spies" for a prolonged period. Beheshti has hinted at trials on several occasions, and former Foreign Minister Yazdi recently predicted that the Assembly would favor trials. [redacted]

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Some improvement in the Iranian-Soviet ties seems likely. Tehran will continue to be extremely suspicious of the USSR, fearful of its intentions in the area and opposed to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Iranian leaders already recognize that the Soviets and the East Europeans are useful alternatives to the US, West Europe and Japan. In the last month, Iran has negotiated new economic agreements with the USSR, East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia and established diplomatic relations with Cuba and South Yemen. [redacted]

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Although many of these contacts are largely symbolic and have little real economic impact, they are important politically and psychologically. The Iranian leadership values them as a means of reassuring its domestic audience that Iran has alternatives to the West and can survive the imposition of additional sanctions. More contacts are likely, and there is a good chance Iran will look to the USSR as a source of new arms purchases-- [redacted]

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[redacted]

Internal Unrest

The first year of the Khomeini regime has been characterized by repeated outbursts of violence among the country's numerous minorities, which compose almost half of the population. Minority unrest already has presented Iran's neighbors with opportunities to interfere in the country. Iraq is a major backer of several groups among the Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs. The Soviets have long had contacts with several groups. [redacted]

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We anticipate more ethnic disturbances this summer. The Kurds, because of their comparatively good organization, are the pace setter for this unrest--they control most of the countryside in Kordestan and West Azarbayjan provinces. If the regime fails to suppress the Kurds, the other minorities will be encouraged to press their own demands for local autonomy. [redacted]

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The Iranian Armed Forces are too weak and demoralized by the revolution to restore the government's authority over the Kurds. At the same time, the largest Kurdish group, the Kurdish Democratic Party, shows no inclination to force the issue by proclaiming independence and prefers to negotiate with the regime for increased local autonomy. The prospects are good for continued sporadic fighting punctuated by rounds of fruitless negotiations. [ ]

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The minorities are too divided to bring down the Khomeini government, although they are a continuing drain on Tehran's resources and attention. Only if the Arabs in Khuzestan province--perhaps with the support of their Iraqi backers--succeed in halting oil production would the regime be in serious danger of losing control of Tehran and the Persian heartland. The Arabs seem too weak (comprising only half the province's population) and divided to do so. [ ]

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#### Key Variables

Several developments could substantially alter the near term outlook for Iran. A major uncertainty is Khomeini's health. We believe his poor health prevents him from devoting full attention to the country's problems. Barring assassination, however, we doubt that he will die within the next six months. As long as he remains alive and at least somewhat alert, we expect he will continue to play the role of ultimate arbitrator of political disputes and his vision of Iran's future will set the tone for the country's politics. [ ]

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If Khomeini dies in the near term, the power struggle among his lieutenants will intensify. There is no established procedure for choosing his successor and no Iranian religious leader has his national standing. The few functioning institutions of the Islamic Republic are not yet capable of holding the regime together if the power struggle to succeed Khomeini becomes violent. [ ]

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Khomeini's death and an ensuing succession struggle would further postpone the end of the hostage crisis. Few, if any, Iranian politicians would be eager to urge the hostages release when hardliners like Beheshti could argue that such an approach violated the will of the late Imam. Moreover, with Khomeini gone, no Iranian figure could impose his will on the militants without resort to force and none would appear eager to do battle with the Imam's student followers. [ ]

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Tehran's relationship with Iraq is another key variable. At present, both sides seem to recognize that a full scale war is not in their own best interest since it would risk

25X1 [ ] exposing domestic divisions and damage their oil industries. Continued small scale border clashes, mutual subversion, and attacks on senior figures and embassies seems likely, however, since neither side shows any interest in a negotiated settlement. [ ]

25X1 [ ] If the situation got out of control and major hostilities began, the hostages would be further endangered. At worst, the militants might carry out their threat to consider an Iraqi attack as a US plot and kill the hostages. At best, the hostages would be ignored while the Iranians focused on the battle with Baghdad. An Iraqi-Iranian war would also increase the danger somewhat of Soviet intervention in Iran. [ ]

25X1 [ ] The Iraqi supported exile movement centered around former Prime Minister Bakhtiar and General Oveisi is another potentially destabilizing factor. While we seriously doubt that the exiles can anytime soon bring down the Khomeini government, given their continuing lack of popular support and the demoralization of the military, the exiles may be able to mount some kind of spectacular operation (such as killing Beheshti, a major defection from the Iranian military, setting up an enclave) tensions would increase significantly in Tehran. [ ]

25X1 [ ] The Iranian left could also play a destabilizing role. Currently the left is too weak and divided to challenge the regime. The independent leftists--the Fedayeen and Mujahedin--were hurt by a campus crackdown orchestrated by the clerics in April. The pro-Soviet Tudeh Party continues to try to insinuate itself into a position of influence by siding with Khomeini on all key issues, while clandestinely infiltrating key sectors including the military. [ ]

25X1 [ ] The left continues to build up its strength, however, and to prepare for an eventual confrontation with the Islamic right. This challenge could come in the near term, moreover, if the regime forces the left to fight by trying to break up its organization outside the universities or if the left is able to unify its three major components. A broad leftist alliance of the Fedayeen, Mujahedin and Tudeh would compel the government to move rapidly to preempt the challenge. A major clash between the government and the left would not necessarily lead to an improvement in US-Iranian relations. During the crackdown on campus leftists in April, Tehran also began initiating the current negotiations with the Soviets to improve economic ties. [ ]

Iran remains in the midst of a revolution whose ultimate outcome is unclear. There is little reason to believe that the situation will clarify within the next three months. The most likely near term prediction includes continued jockeying for power by numerous factions in Tehran, while peripheral areas of the country like rural Kordestan and Baluchistan may enjoy de facto autonomy. Several Middle Eastern countries have already provided precedent for prolonged anarchy including Lebanon. The greatest dangers for the US in this situation are not related to the hostages but to the risk that the vacuum of power in Iran may ultimately invite Soviet interference. [REDACTED]

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